

SOLANDER

The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society

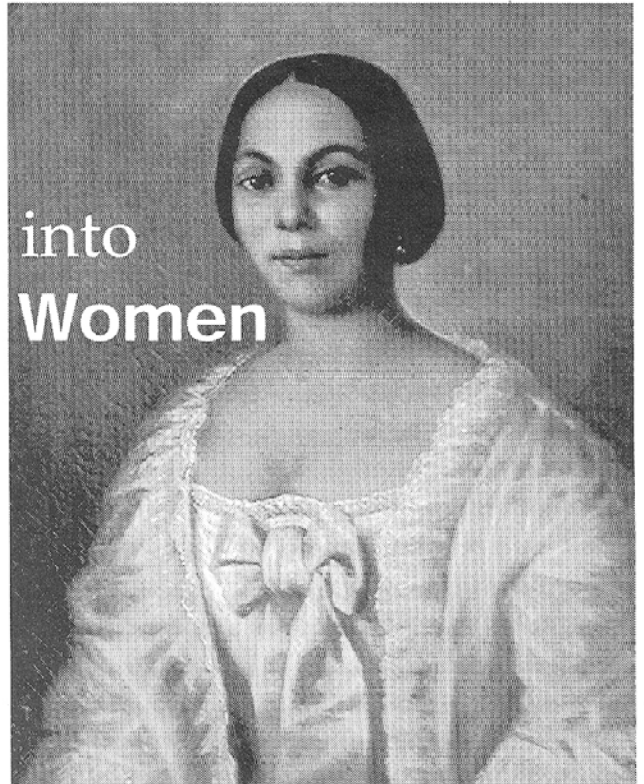
What Might Have Been

An Overview of
Alternate History

Breathing Life into
Shadowy Women
from the
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A historical fiction
sub-genre?



Irene Goodman on why Anne Boleyn is the poster girl of
Historical Fiction

**Malcolm Archibald. Margaret Elphinstone. Alan Furst.
James Nelson. Medallion Press.**

and

Building a Course on the Historical Novel, *Part One*.

Something Old, Something New

SARAH JOHNSON discusses the historical fiction of Medallion Press with Vice President Leslie Burbank.

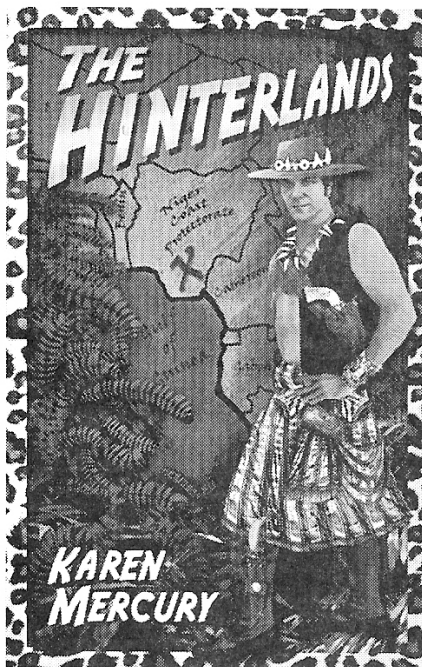
As an avid reader of historical fiction, I'm always on the lookout for something different: unique settings, underused time periods, fresh storytelling, a new way of looking at historical events. When asked what publisher I might like to profile next, Medallion Press came to mind. Medallion, founded in 2003, is fairly new on the block, but they've quickly established themselves as a publisher worth watching.

Not only does Medallion willingly take on subject matter that's out of the ordinary, but they go all out when it comes to marketing and promoting their novels. It would be hard to miss Medallion's presence in the media lately. Striking full-color ads for Medallion novels have appeared on the covers of *Publishers Weekly* and *Romantic Times*. Scott Oden's *Men of Bronze*, a historical novel and one of Medallion's few hardcovers, made a big splash at BookExpo America this June, complete with huge banners hanging from the ceiling of the Javits Convention Center. Historical fiction is just one genre that Medallion publishes, but it's a special interest for both its President, Helen Rosburg, and its Vice President, Leslie Burbank: both are enthusiasts who have written historical novels themselves.

Just as they promise in their mission statement, Medallion's current list couldn't be more diverse. *The Hinterlands*, by HNS member Karen Mercury, is a romantic, action-packed, occasionally hilarious adventure set in the steamy jungles of the Kingdom of Benin (modern Nigeria) in 1897. Maura Shaw's *The Keeners*, an entertaining family saga, follows its heroine, Margaret Meehan, from famine-ridden Ireland to the factory town of Troy, New York, in the mid-19th century. Scott Oden's *Men of Bronze* is set in Egypt of 526 BC and based around an episode mentioned in the *Histories* of

Herodotus. And Helen Rosburg's own *By Honor Bound* features a romance between two of Marie Antoinette's servants, set against the fall of Versailles.

Leslie Burbank graciously agreed to answer my questions on historical fiction, Medallion's publishing program, and their current and upcoming titles. The company's website (www.medallionpress.com) provides additional background on their novels, including plot summaries, genres published, and submission guidelines.



What factors figured into your decision to form a new company?

Helen Rosburg, our President, CEO and Editor-in-Chief, was an author first. I, myself am an author. Helen felt that perhaps we could construct a company that respected the craft of writing in addition to being a business. We envisioned a company that continued to strive to get better, not necessarily bigger, and to create a home for voices not published and stories not often written. We discussed all the variables and decided that for us, the company would be about the books, the stories, first and foremost.

Why did you decide to get involved in publishing historical fiction?

We are both lovers of the epic historical novels of the past, and while many people continue to say those are a thing of the past never to be resurrected, we simply don't agree. A good story is a good story no matter when it is set in time.

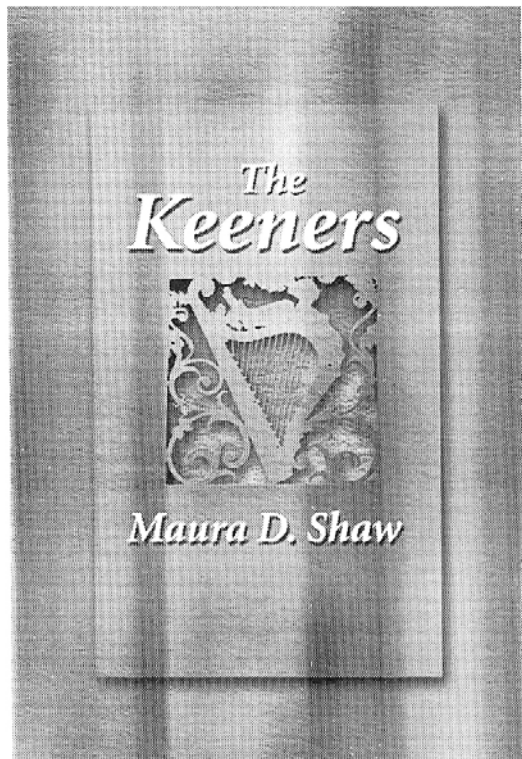
Profile

When deciding on historical novels to acquire for Medallion, what qualities do you look for?

Again, this is really about just an overall story that stays with us days after we've read it. When I read *Men of Bronze* by Scott Oden, I couldn't put it down, and I couldn't stop thinking about it and telling everyone else at the house about it.

What other reasons went into your decision to publish *Men of Bronze*?

I think *Men of Bronze* chose us. It is an incredible work, and we would have been quite foolish to let it slip through our fingers. It's about the fall of Egypt, but again, not during a time most people know about. In fact, I had no idea that the Greeks and Persians



banded together to take down the Egyptian empire until I read this novel.

Why did you choose to publish it in hardcover?

When you publish in hardcover, you are making a commitment to the project in a way no other format does. And it allows for more critical reviews. We wanted a beautiful book to match a beautiful story, so hardcover really was the only choice.

Do you plan on publishing *Men of Bronze* and *The Keeners* in paperback eventually?

We may but the jury is out at this time on that. We have a few interesting possibilities going on in regards to the paperback versions, but mum's the word at the moment.

When it comes to settings for historical fiction, either time-wise or place-wise, do you have any personal favorites?

No, actually. I think we enjoy learning about all kinds of times, place, cultures and circumstances. It's really the best way to learn about history in some cases. Our advice is that if you are seeking publication through Medallion, that you steer away from periods and places that have already been written heavily about. Take us somewhere new.

Historical fiction is one of those genres that publishers are always saying is hard to sell and market. While there are plenty of readers, no industry exists like it does for other genres, and it has no special section in bookstores. How do you market historical fiction specifically? Do you do anything special, or do you feel that it finds its proper audience easily enough?

I think it does come down to the amount of money a publisher will spend on marketing and advertising. Any book, in any genre, could be successful with the right amount of money behind it. We plot out just who the book is targeted to and try to reach that audience accordingly. I do think most writers of historical fiction need to know they may not reach a "break-out" level of success overnight, that it is more of a slow climb, but I think fans of historical fiction are quite possibly some of the most loyal readers an author can have. I, myself will buy every other book a historical fiction author has, if I enjoyed one of their novels.

Do you feel that all of the recent promotion of Medallion's novels has succeeded in attracting new readers of historical fiction?

Yes. It is evidenced by our sales of our June hardcover, *Men of Bronze*. If you advertise it, people will come.

In a recent *Publishers Weekly* article, you stated that Medallion decided to go after new ideas and historical locales that other publishers might not be doing. I wonder if you could expand upon what you meant when you talked about the "evolved reader who wants more grit and sense of place in their romance." Do you feel that history-intense romances are making a comeback?

I don't believe anything truly goes away. Like fashion, we live in a circle; something is always making a comeback because it never really went away. Again, if more publishers promoted historicals, you'd see a stronger market, but everyone wants to play it safe, and so they stick to the current trends rather than striking out on their own. In romance in particular, it is a challenge for readers to trust that 15th-century India can be just as captivating as medieval England, but it can be done with care and by publishing a magnificent story, as we will with *Sunburst's Citadel* by Therese Nichols in 2006. It's a lavish romance set in a place most readers are unfamiliar with, so you have your romance, but you also really get to explore a new area.

Karen Mercury's *The Hinterlands* is a wonderful book, and I'm pleased to see that Medallion published it, partly because it breaks so many rules – for romance, that is, although the subject's not exactly common for historical fiction either. For example, it's set in colonial Africa, has lots of violence, and some of the material isn't politically correct at all. Does the unusual subject matter present any special marketing challenges, in your opinion? What has reader response been like for *The Hinterlands*, especially from the romance community?

We aren't billing *The Hinterlands* as a romance because as you mentioned, it did break quite a few traditional rules. That being said, *The Hinterlands* has a fabulous romantic element to it. It steams right

alongside the jungle! It's not necessarily politically correct, but it is historically correct, which, when you are seeking historical fiction, is a must. We felt we needed to call it historical fiction because Ms. Mercury's voice is so much larger in scope than what is traditionally seen in romance novels. This isn't the typical medieval knight story, or, as Karen is fond of saying, "the most notorious rake in London" story by any means, and that presents a challenge. The response, however, has been fabulous. And it further proves that we think readers are far more educated and open-minded than most publishers give them credit for. In fact, we are so pleased with Ms. Mercury as a literary talent, we'll be publishing *The Four Quarters of the World* in February of 2006. It's another historical fiction novel set in Africa, and we can't wait.

Out of curiosity, what caused you to classify it as historical fiction instead of historical romance, especially since it's sold in the romance section of chain bookstores? Where do you draw the line between them?

We don't determine where our books are positioned in stores. Wish we did. We've seen vampire novels with no romance whatsoever in them shelved in romance, so go figure. The spine clearly states "historical fiction," and that's all we can do. A historical fiction work for us is one where the actual historical nature of the story is as strong, or stronger, than the romance. Ms. Mercury wasn't afraid to get dirty and show us what life was really like. In most romances, you never hear about the problems with hygiene. There's a reason for that . . . it's not very romantic.

How do your authors find you? What percentage of your novels arrive through agents?

We certainly do enough ads for authors to find us. We've attended genre conferences. We have a website, and we are listed in several writers' guides. We aren't sure how they all find us, but they do. I'd actually say a small percentage, maybe 25%, come through agents. Most are unagented. We don't consider an author more or less talented just because they have an agent. Since both Helen and I were authors, and we didn't have agents . . . we can see both sides of the talent pool, so to speak.

Medallion's online submission guidelines request that prospective authors submit a one-page document detailing their marketing strategy. How much does this play into the decision as to whether to accept a manuscript, and how do you work with authors to promote their books?

It doesn't play into a decision to buy a manuscript at all. But it does tell us something about the professional level of the person we are dealing with. We say all the time that authors must treat publishing as a business. I'm not sure why they don't. So, if this is what you want to do for the rest of your natural life, wouldn't it behoove you to understand the basics in terms of how you will be selling your book? We simply want to know if you even have a website, and do you know what a website is? Have you been to writers' conferences? Are you a member of a writing group? Can you do book signings? Will you travel? Will you create a postcard or mailing, etc.?

Can you tell me about some upcoming historical fiction (or historical romance, or historical fantasy) projects you're especially excited about?

With the utmost pleasure! Marjorie Jones's second historical romance with us will be *The Lighthorseman*, and this is about a hero who comes back from World War I to his farm in Australia. During the war he served as a cavalry officer. It's a beautiful story and is set to debut in March 2006. Marjorie really deserves a special mention because this was an author that we actually asked to write something other than the same old knight/damsel story. She rose to the challenge most magnificently, and *The Lighthorseman* is the result. Another beautiful historical romance set just after the Civil War is Cynthia Thomason's *Gabriel's Angel*. Scott Oden will be back with *Memnon* in June 2006. This hardcover details the story of the only Greek general to do battle with Alexander and win. Another great work by Mr. Oden.

One of our biggest books in terms of excitement is our Young Adult novel, *The Long Hunter* by Don McNair. This is a very strong historical book that chronicles the life of a young boy in the early pioneer days of the East Coast after his family is attacked and killed by Native Americans.

It is his desperate search for his little sister who has been taken by the tribe of attackers, and his search for his own self that really brings home this heartbreaking, gut-wrenching novel. While it is aimed for the YA market, I think adults will enjoy the story, though be warned, elements inherent to the time period are not glossed over.

We are thrilled to announce that we've acquired the historical romance *Vanquished* by multi-published, award-winning author Hope Tarr. It's really a delightful novel set during the time of the women's suffrage movement in England. We love strong heroines in not-so-common situations. Here again, the historical elements of this book really make it stand out.

What do you hope readers come to expect when they see Medallion's name on a book?

Quality genre fiction. Stories that provide an escape. We aren't trying to change the world with what we publish, but we hope readers will trust our books and in them find laughter and chills, tears and joy, and for those few moments a reader is connected to our fiction, we hope they are entertained.

Sarah Johnson, American coordinating editor of the Historical Novels Review, is the author of Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre (Libraries Unlimited, 2005).

